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ABSTRACT

A literature review of the Educational Resources and Information Center (ERIC), Psychological Abstracts, and Dissertation Abstracts International was conducted to examine research data and observations concerning the problems faced by males during and after divorce. Based on a scheme of divorce elements developed by Bohannon (1970) these problems are discussed under the following headings: (1) legal stressors, deriving from the grounds for divorce and attorney relationship; (2) economic stressors, which derive from the division of money and property; (3) emotional stressors, which result from the problem of the deteriorating marital relationship; (4) community (social) stressors, resulting from changes of friends and alterations in community involvement; (5) co-parental stressors, which include problems of custody, single parent homes, and visitation; and (6) psychic stressors, deriving from the problem of regaining individual autonomy. It is noted that the literature on divorce, fathering, and stress appears to support the conclusion that divorce is stressful for males and that for fathers, the future relationship with their children is a significant aspect of this stress. It appears that, compared to females, divorced males experience a higher degree of stress due to the smaller number of support systems available to them and have needs related to household management, coping with loneliness from the loss of spouse and children, and re-education in social skills. The concluding section of the paper discusses the quality of research concerning divorced males and implications of the extant research for counselors. (TE)

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Stressors Affecting the Male Divorced Client

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Abstract

Research data and observations concerning the problems faced by males during and after divorce were examined. These problems were organized in a scheme offered by Bohannan (1970) who proposed that the divorce process proceeds in six separate areas: 1) the legal divorce, which explores the grounds for divorce and attorney relationship; 2) the economic divorce, which deals with money and property; 3) the emotional divorce, which centers around the problem of the deteriorating marriage; 4) the community divorce, which explores changes of friends and community involvement; 5) the co-parental divorce which deals with custody, single parent homes and visitation; and 6) the psychic divorce, which centers around the problems of regaining individual autonomy. Conclusions and further research implications are offered.

Stressors Affecting the Male Divorced Client

Recent years saw an escalation in the divorce rate in the United States. It is estimated that half of all marriages initiated in the 1980's will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981). By 1990, according to Smithworth (1987) 32% of all children in America will experience the divorce of their parents. The stressful nature of divorce has been widely documented. During the post-divorce adjustment period, individuals are particularly vulnerable to a wide variety of physical and emotional disorders (Drill , 1985; Hingst, Hyman and Salmon, 1985). The courts assume that financial support is the primary function of the divorced fathers since the typical custody agreement gives the mother custody and the father child support obligations and visitations rights (Smithworth, 1987). However recent research strongly indicates that many divorced fathers value their role as a parent and find it rewarding, satisfying and a source of pride and self esteem (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Simring, 1985). Even in absence of children males who divorce experience stressors resulting from the divorce process (Bloom, Bernard & Caldwell, 1981).

Through the Dialog computer retrieval system the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Psychological Abstacts and Dissertation Abstacts has been utilized to conduct a literature review of males experiences when going through the process of divorce. The information gathered was organized using Bohannan's (1970) six areas: legal, economic, emotional, community (social), co-parental and psychic (identity).

Legal Stressors

Until recently it was customary to give custody of children to the mother, particularly when children of "tender years" were involved (Roman & Haddad, 1978). Recently, we see more fathers asking and receiving custody of their children (Tedder, Scherman & Sheridan, 1984), and the number of parents asking and receiving joint custody is on the increase (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985; Simring, 1985). In the past, males did not have to make a decision about custody. Today, males have to decide whether to seek legally a more active parenting role with their children through joint custody or sole custody. This introduces new stressors concerning the process of finding an attorney and establishing grounds for seeking sole custody or joint custody (Rogers, 1989). But, for a male to receive sole custody the court has to be convinced that the maternal mother is unfit to be a parent (Tedder, Scherman & Sheridan, 1984)

Even after a divorce has been finalized legal stressors do not always stop. Krick (1987) stated that under changing circumstances a divorced father may desire some amendments in the divorce decree concerning child support, alimony, visitation, or custody. However, it is very difficult in many cases to get such changes approved by a court, as well as being expensive and time consuming (Henning & Oldham, 1977; Scheiner, Musetto & Cordier, 1982), and divorced males find such post-divorce hearings to be a major source of stress in their lives (Cormier, 1981)

Economic Stressors

Divorce appears to bring on financial strain to all but the most wealthy families. Even if both the husband and the wife are employed, the splitting of one household into two is likely to result in a net financial

loss, a worrisome and stressful situation for most divorcing males even when they are making more money than their ex-wives (Honeyman, 1985).

In addition to a reduced standard of living, divorced males experience economic stresses as a result of continued financial obligation to his ex-wife and/or children. Dixon and Weitzman (1982) found that the relative balance of resources between husband and wife were an important factor in determining which spouse files for the divorce. Specifically, women who filed were more likely than the wives of men who filed to have an occupation. Similarly, men who filed had higher occupational prestige than the men of women who filed. Although the impact of these economic differences was not discussed, it seems likely that these differences in resources would influence the degree of stress experienced in reaction to the economics of divorce.

Disagreement over finances are a major source of conflict between ex-spouses. Hetherington et al. (1976) noted that not paying court ordered alimony and/or child support may allow a divorced man to survive financially, but often at the cost of considerable guilt. Non-custodial fathers, according to Tropfl (1984), tend to decrease the amount of financial support they provide after their ex-wife remarries, but increase after they remarry.

Job performance is another area that can cause economic stress for divorced males. Hetherington et al. (1976) found that a common experience for their sample of divorced males was a feeling of immobilization and ineffectiveness at work just at the time they were in need of increased income. A study by Honeyman (1985) also found that divorced males experienced declining job effectiveness. Divorced males who assume a significant share of child care duties face additional difficulties in their

occupational role. These difficulties center around the conflict between their work schedules and the time demands of child care and visitation (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981).

Emotional Stressors

Most of the research on the emotional stressors encountered by males was reported during the 70's and early 80's. According to Dreifus (1979) following divorce the father is experiencing anxiety and depression. At that point of time the divorcing father is undergoing an emotional crisis. This finding was supported by Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) longitudinal study in which they found that nearly 50% of the divorced fathers in their sample reported they were experiencing depression at 18 months post-separation. Hetherington et al. (1976) found divorced fathers alternating between feeling depressed and experiencing an ebullient sense of freedom and relief. Pett (1982) found divorced males to feel at times out of control both behaviorally and emotionally. Non-custodial fathers too, are experiencing considerable emotional reactions following divorce (Kock & Lowery ,1985).

Although several emotional responses appear typical for both men and women during divorce (Tedder, Scherman, & Sheridan, 1984) it has been suggested that these responses may be more stressful for men (Bloom & Caldwell, 1981; Plummer & Koch - Hattem, 1986). Bloom & Caldwell (1981) report that males with disrupted marriages are at highest risk and show highest admission rates into psychiatric facilities. Several writers suggest that the typical male, conditioned to suppress his emotional responses (Gildberg, 1976; Seagull & Seagull, 1977; Weiss, 1975) or dependent on women for meeting his emotional needs (Dreyfus,

1979; Hetherington et al. 1976) is poorly prepared to manage the strong emotional responses which frequently accompany divorce.

Community (Social) Stressors

Traiditionally, men are unaccustomed to sharing intimate details of their lives, they are unsure how much to reveal about themselves to friends and family members. Weiss (1975) stated that next to telling their children, spouses are most apprehensive about telling their families about their impending separation and divorce. Since most married couples have married friends, most males lose their social support when divorce occurs. Males have fewer resources than their female counterparts in the area of available support in the community (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981; Tedder, Scherman & Sheridan, 1984).

Fears of becoming intimate and sexually active again are also social stresses male divorced clients experience. Males are especially apprehensive about dating and many of them are solving this fear by not dating or dating very little (Tedder, Libbee, Scherman, 1981). The males' sexual behavior is also changing as a result of the spread of and fears about acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) (Reinsich, Sanders & Ziemba-Davis, 1989).

Hetherington et al. (1976) found that while becoming socially active after a divorce may cause stress, many divorced men make use of social contacts as a means of reducing their amount of stress. This has been confirmed by increasing demands for social contacts and social support groups by males, especially the custodial father (Tedder, Scherman, & Sheridan, 1984)

Co-parental Stressors

Although there are some trends toward newer forms of post-divorce families through such arrangements as legal and/or practical joint custody (Ahrons, 1980; Dimidjan, 1984; Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), the traditional custody arrangement still prevails. Most children of divorced parents have one functional parent (custodial) and one parent whose relationship with the child is limited (Ryberg, 1986).

Some divorced fathers, ambivalent about their parental role, regard children as psychological or economic burdens (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and view visitation and child care as limiting the time available to invest in other areas of life (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981). Visitation by such guilt-motivated fathers would surely be stressful for them as well as detrimental to their children. Greif (1985) noted that frequently fathers obtain custody for four reasons: 1) because their ex-wife did not want custody due to personal, emotional, or financial reasons, 2) because the children chose the father due to emotional of financial reasons, 3) because the father saw the ex-wife as unable to function as a competent parent, and 4) because of a desire to maintain what remained of his family and home life and thus he actively pursued custody. The amount of stress experienced as a single father seemed to vary as a function of the degree to which the father desired custody and whether the divorce occurred as a result of desertion by the wife. The stronger the desire to gain custody, the less stress and dissatisfaction associated with single patenting. Fathers who gained custody due to desertion tended to report lower levels of confidence in their parenting (Greif, 1985).

Continued conflict between ex-spouses concerning child support and other financial matters, visitation schedules, custody, child rearing practices, as well as unfinished husband-wife conflict of intimacy with new partners, and feelings of anger, desertion, resentment and attachment is frequently reported (Hetherington, et al., 1976; Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978; Scheiner et all., 1982). Such fighting can be stressful for the divorced father not only for its own sake but also for the implications it carries regarding future contact with his children. Bowman and Ahrons (1985) report that while inter-parental conflict was associated with less shared parental responsibility and decision-making, it was not associated with less time spent by the father with his children, nor was it associated with less involvement by the father in activities with his children. Thus, while conflict between parents may reduce a father's involvement in aspects of parenting that include the mother, it appears that conflict does not restrict a father's level of direct involvement with his children. However, Koch (1985) reported that the inter-parental relationship was significantly correlated with amount of visitation by the noncustodial father. Koch further reported no effects on visitation due to the father's marital status. Tropf (1984) found that if either spouse remarries, the noncustodial father tends to visit less often, although the visits tend to last for longer periods of time than before the remarriage. In addition, Tropf found that voluntary support by the noncustodial father tends to decrease after his ex-wife remarries and increase after he remarries. It appears that the relationship between interparental conflict, parental marital status, and the father-child relationship is complex, and warrants further investigation to gain a clear understanding of the interactions between these variables.

Frey (1986) conducted interviews with custodial fathers and synthesized the content of the interviews into ten themes regarding the fathers' perceptions of their role as parent. These themes included both positive and negative aspects of being a single parent. On the positive side, these men reported that single fathering was a desirable role, it allowed increased closeness with their children, it produced increased awareness about self, children, society's reactions to single parents, and the effects of divorce. These positive experiences are supported by Bowen (1987), who found that custodial fathers reported improved relationships with their children and more protective attitudes towards their children. On the negative side, Frey (1986) found that custodial fathers experience doubts about their competency as a parent, restrictions on their time, and stress due to the continuous nature of parenting. Bowen (1987) identified four major problem areas for custodial fathers : 1) child rearing and discipline, 2) lack of adult support for parenting, 3) difficulty integrating work and family demands, and 4) lack of time to meet all responsibilities. In addition, Bowen (1987) found that stress for custodial fathers was greatest during the first year post-divorce, and for fathers whose children were preschool age.

Ryberg (1986) investigated noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children over the first five years after divorce. The results of this study indicated that noncustodial fathers' involvement increased over time for fathers with high regard for their former spouses' parenting ability. Post hoc findings demonstrated, significantly, that fathers with adolescent children had less involvement with their children than noncustodial fathers with young children. The study also concluded that noncustodial fathers that have high levels of involvement with their step-

children were less involved with their own children than noncustodial fathers without step-children.

Joint custody appears to be an appropriate and desirable child care alternative in more types of divorced families than is currently accepted or encouraged. Dimidjian (1984) conducted a study that compared the experiences of joint custody and visitation (noncustodial) fathers. The study produced the following significant findings: joint custody fathers (post-divorce) were more involved in parenting their children, were more satisfied with their custody states, felt more responsible for meeting the emotional needs of the family, and reported feeling less anxious, less frustrated and less lonely following divorce. Simring (1985) found in a study of 44 divorced and remarried fathers with legal joint custody that joint custody was considered to be a context within which fathers were able to negotiate a positive relationship with their children. Most of the fathers in this study were strongly in favor of using the legal supports that are a part of a joint custody agreement as a measure of insuring both parents' attachment to their children after divorce.

Psychic Stressors

With the end of the marriage, most divorcing people lose some fundamental elements of their self definition. They lose their partner, the social definitions of themselves as married, as respectably settled, and, often in the case of noncustodial fathers, as family men. They have lost their former definition, and have not created a new one yet. Years of living together create a self-identity as a person who is part of a couple. That role of a married person permeates nearly all sectors of one's life. For some, the identity as a married person becomes so pervasive that they feel they have lost themselves almost entirely (Landman, 1986).

Males go through an identity change following the divorce. Rosenthal and Keshet (1981) believe that learning to be a single father allows men to learn to take care of themselves, to re-experience and manage their emotions, and to redefine themselves as adults. Divorced men, whether fathers or not, must learn to take care of themselves as well. For many, this means unlearning self-denial.

Quality of Research Concerning Divorced Males

The research on divorced men is overall of fairly poor quality when considered against an "ideal" study that utilizes random sampling, control groups, and data collection by reliable and valid methods including multiple and repeated measurements. The available literature is not extensive, and its usefulness limited by the fact that it has been largely conducted with middle or upper middle class subjects, using mainly structured interviews or newly created questionnaires whose validity and reliability may not be firmly established. Additionally, few studies have specifically examined the situation of the largest class of post-divorce fathers, the noncustodial father, while none of the studies have compared divorced fathers to divorced childless men, and few studies have made comparisons between divorced fathers and married men.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) is one of the few strong studies utilizing multiple measurements and follow up procedures. However even this study suffers from potential bias of subjects receiving treatment and from unproven instrumentation. Hethrington, Cox and Cox (1976) is another well executed study. Finally, the Wertlieb, Budman, Demby and Randall (1982) is a well executed study although their findings seem to have little impact on the counseling practitioner.

Although the quality of research concerning divorced males is questionable, we cannot overlook the tremendous difficulties in conducting such research. There are many reality constraints such as the difficulty of obtaining unbiased samples and in keeping track of them long enough to do a longitudinal study. Some of these men remarry quickly and others move immediately following divorce. Another major problem concerns the measurement of something that can affect a person's life to such a degree that divorce can, and that divorce adjustment is an ongoing, constant process that precedes at different rates for different people. Divorce adjustment is so variable and pervasive that no instrument procedure, or methodology will ever completely describe it. We might be reduced to study this subject "brick by brick". However, the quality of the "bricks" can and should be improved.

Implications for the Counselor Practitioner

Men are being urged and are assuming a more active role in fathering. This, together with the fact that new family forms that compete with the traditional nuclear family model of parenting are appearing in large numbers indicate an increased educational and applied skills acquisition on the part of the practicing counselor. Mother-headed single parent families, father-headed single parent families, and joint custody families are receiving research attention. The dominant class of post-divorce fathers, the noncustodial father is also beginning to be researched. In the absence of clearly defined norms for post-divorce fathering (Nieto, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) as well as the type of father/child relationship they will have, men must consciously decide whether they will continue a relationship with their children after divorce. It appears practitioners

need to be aware of these issues and begin to develop appropriate intervention strategies.

The literature pertaining to divorce, fathering, and stress appears to support the following conclusions. Divorce is stressful for males and that for fathers, the future relationship with their children is a significant aspect of this stress. There are some concerns that are shared by females and males. Both feel the need to understand the impact of divorce on adults and children, would like to be exposed to effective child rearing methods, to identify support systems in the community, and are concerned with dating, remarriage, and legal consideration. The literature, however, indicated significant differences too. Females experience loss of a relationship, a larger financial loss, career concerns, coping with sex discrimination and difficulties with car, house and yard maintenance. Males experience a higher degree of stress due to the smaller number of support systems available. They also expressed needs with household management, coping with loneliness since they experience double loss (spouse and children) and reeducation in social skills (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Tedder, Scherman & Sheridan, 1984).

From the literature cited it appears that counselors might be very helpful to divorced males. Understanding of their needs is a first step in providing better services to this population. In addition it seems that role clarification following divorce is a primary counseling consideration. The parental, emotional, social and identity stressors should be especially explored in the counseling process. Most males expressed the biggest concern with social skills since most of their social events were planned by their spouse. They were scared about asking a women for a date and horrified at the prospect of spending time with a female they didn't know

well for a period of several hours (Tedder, Libbee & Scherman, 1981). Counseling will be very beneficial to males in the initial stages following divorce in identifying social stressors and acquiring shills to better cope with them.

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